

YELLOW FEVER PT. 2

# CAUCASIAN IN ASIA

*Being white when the fever's for yellow*

Tokyo, 1994. I'm standing in the shower at the gym, staring down at the long, strong, black hairs snaking along the tiles around the drain. I've just learned that my sweetheart has cheated on me with a Japanese woman. I've been deemed inadequate, and those beautiful hairs seem to me emblematic of why. My hair is okay. Not great. It's brown and thin. I look down and don't think of that infidelity as a problem with him and me, or with him, but as a personal failure in the face of a beautiful threat.

The memory of that moment, and those hairs, travelled with me through the years until I eventually wrote them into a short story called "Locked Out" in which the narrator, Cathy, suspects her husband of having an affair with his secretary. When she locks herself out of their apartment, she ends up showering at her lovely Korean neighbour's place:

*Wrapped in the towel, I picked up her hairbrush, which was full of her long, unbelievably strong black hairs. This made me think of Ikeda-san. Her hair must feel like this, I thought. If Hank was having an affair, I could imagine strands of it between his thumb and index finger. Not pale brown (or, let's face it, occasionally white) like mine, but black and heavy and musky and young. I clawed Sook Young's hairs out of the brush and dropped them in the little plastic trash can.*

Writing fiction is the chance to do things over. In that story, I had Cathy deal with the situation much more actively than I had.



I'd also like to redo the conversation I had with a Caucasian Brit on a Tokyo subway platform. I can't remember how we came to the part where he said, "I feel sorry for you," with "you" meaning Caucasian women in Asia faced with the prevalence of yellow fever. I'd like to speak with him again now, over two decades later. I'd ask him all my questions, rather than sputtering in anger.

The thing is, I wasn't just angry at his arrogance. I was angry because I was sorry for us too, and no amount of sticking up for us could seem to change that. I did ask questions about it to Caucasian men I knew, though. One colleague told me, "It sounds terrible, but Japanese girlfriends are very convenient. They're very good at housework."

"I do housework!" I practically shouted. "I'm convenient!" Which left hanging in the air the question as to what it was about me - about us - that was inconvenient. I didn't ask it.

"They love sex," said a friend, when pressed.

"I also love sex," I insisted, which led to a few awkward seconds. And then I said, "Are you sure they're not just trying to please you by behaving as if they do?"

"No," he said, "but it's so nice that they do that. They also pretend to hate it, which feels good too."

These deeply frustrating conversations were fruitless, partly because there was no incentive for these men to see things differently, and partly - largely - because both they *and* I were painting Japanese women with a broad brush, using "you," "we," and "they" as if any nation or race of women could be described and decided upon in a sentence or two.

It was such simplistic thinking that also led to my pain in the shower at the gym: "*They* are more beautiful. *They* have better hair. There clearly isn't enough room for us all to find happiness here." Such thinking took the spotlight off the problems I wasn't admitting to in my relationship, and made a scapegoat out of Japanese "otherness".

As a reader of this magazine, you are likely to have found yourself in the high beams of Asian fetishists, victims of "yellow fever." (Who came up with that term? Surely not someone who thinks it's a good thing. Even a urine fetish - the desire for a "golden shower" - gets a name with a bit of charm.) They see you standing out from the crowd and come at you, sometimes with a sort of dewy appreciation but sometimes with the idea, so well put by Julie Zhang in *Vice*, that you are "bashful, privately kinky and rumoured to be in possession of an extra snug, sideways vagina."

Well, for this Caucasian woman who spent over 25 years in Beijing, Taipei, Tokyo, and Singapore, the assumption has been instead that she is the opposite: assertive in public, and anything from conventional to demanding in the sack. People are as wrong about me as they are about you.

The conditions have to be right for a fever to take hold, and these conditions have been brewing at least since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and the propaganda around the “Yellow Peril.” This included an editorial by the hugely influential Horace Greeley, founder and editor of the *New-York Tribune*, in which the otherwise quite liberal author and statesman opined, “The Chinese are uncivilized, unclean, and filthy beyond all conception, without any of the higher domestic or social relations; lustful and sensual in their dispositions; *every* female is a prostitute of the basest order.”

Well done, Horace. With your baseless horror you ignited fascination, and you weren't alone in the world in doing so. What a shame that fascination has held Asian women at arm's length even as it seeks to possess them. Bring them any closer and you'd have to see their individual characteristics.

Yellow fever - the Asian fetish - is unlike a toe fetish or toy fetish, because those fetishes see the objects as they are, and the objects don't mind. To me, the objectification of Asian women is a subset of the objectification of all women - a strenuous effort not to see women as they truly are - and it keeps us from knowing and respecting each other. *This* is now the source of discomfort for me, not the fact that I was seen as less attractive than the Asian women I lived among for so long, and not my stupid hair.✕

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